

A STUDY OF COHESIVE DEVICES IN IELTS LISTENING TASKS

Nguyen Thi Quynh Hoa^{a*}, Le Thi Anh Tuyen^b

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Abstract: Cohesive devices play an essential role in creating organized speech and rendering speech content to listeners. Therefore, having a thorough understanding of cohesive devices helps language learners improve their listening skills. Based on the cohesion framework of Halliday and Hasan (1976), this study is aimed at finding out types of cohesive devices as well as examining syntactic and semantic features of cohesive devices commonly used in IELTS Listening Tasks. To conduct the research, 548 cohesive devices were identified from 92 tapescripts of IELTS Listening Section 4 in IELTS Listening Tasks. All of these samples were collected from updated IELTS test materials. It is hoped that the results of the study can be helpful for Vietnamese learners of English in improving their listening skills and for IELTS test takers in better tackling Section 4 of IELTS Listening Tests.

Key words: cohesion; cohesive devices; listening skill; syntactic features; semantic features.

1. Introduction

As English continues to expand its influence as an international language, it has become more and more necessary for those who wish to take advantage of educational, business or immigration opportunities to be competent in English and, to be able to demonstrate this competence by means of results in prestigious examinations such as IELTS. There is no denying that IELTS (International English Language Testing System) has been increasingly recognized as an international benchmark for proficiency in English. IELTS is a test of all four English language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. Of all the four skills, the listening skill has been a matter of great concern as learners often find it difficult to excel at this skill. For English language learners, IELTS Listening

unable to complete IELTS listening exercises as successfully as expected. One of the main obstacles facing them is the failure to grasp main ideas and follow the flow of information due to speakers' high speech rate and inadequate vocabulary of hearers. One suggested strategy to deal with this problem is to recognize cohesive devices in the listening texts.

As a matter of fact, cohesion, one of the most crucial aspects in discourse, has been widely investigated in the field of linguistics. Learners of English, especially IELTS test takers, are usually taught that cohesion plays a fundamental role in the organization and comprehension of second language texts. However, the relationship between cohesive devices and listening comprehension in general and in IELTS Listening Tasks in particular has not been intensively explored.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Cohesion

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is a network of lexical, grammatical, and other relations which link various parts of a text. It refers to a range of possibilities that exist for linking one sentence and among other things with the other that has gone before

^aThe University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies

^bTran Phu High School, Da Nang city

*Corresponding author

Nguyen Thi Quynh Hoa
Email: ntqhoa@ufl.udn.vn

Practice Tests have become a valuable source of materials for self-practice thanks to their authentic content. However, during the practice, learners often encounter a variety of difficulties; therefore, they are

or previously mentioned. Cohesion can be expressed partly through grammar and partly through vocabulary. Therefore, cohesion can refer to grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. The former consists of reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction while the latter is comprised of reiteration and collocation. In other words, cohesion refers to the grammatical and/or relationships between different elements of a text. These relationships include within-sentence, inter-sentence, and cross-section lexical or structural interdependency. Thus, it can be said that the notion of cohesion is not merely a syntactic but also a semantic one.

Overall, cohesion is a relational concept. It is not the presence of a particular class of item that is cohesive, but the relation between one item and another. In terms of semantic sense, cohesion means the link between a sentence and another sentence which mutually offers information or clues to each other. In other words, “cohesion is a more general notion, and one that is above considerations of structure.” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p.5)

2.2. Cohesive devices

Cohesion, based on Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) cohesion theory, can give a sequence of sentences a coherent texture. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). They pointed out that cohesion is one of the linguistic system’s major resources for text construction. In fact, cohesion represents the presence of explicit cues in the text that allow readers/listeners to find semantic relations within it as part of linguistic system enhancing the semantic potentials of text. These cohesive devices used by speakers and writers in order to express meaning based on the interpretation of the listeners and readers provide semantic relations for the semantic units whose interpretations they facilitate. “Cohesive devices” is the term attributed to elements which have “the property of signaling that the interpretation of the passage in question depends on something else” (Halliday & Hasan, p.13).

According to Xi (2010), each language has its own characteristics of certain cohesive devices for creating links between textual elements and there are different devices in different languages for achieving cohesive

effects. These devices are known as “cohesive ties”, “cohesive connectors”, “cohesive links”, “cohesive markers”. However, the function and meaning of these labels remain unchanged.

In this research, cohesive devices are defined as single words or phrases that basically make the text connected. These expressions show semantic relations between an element in a text and other vital elements crucial for interpretation of the text. In communication, cohesive devices are essential as they help the speakers and/or the listeners understand the relationship between different sentences or between various parts of speech.

It is admitted that the connection which cohesion performs is explicitly expressed in the surface structure of the text. Text comprehension, therefore, is obtained through a variety of lexical and grammatical relationships between items within sentences. In this study, the typology and taxonomy proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) is adopted because it is by far the most popular in the field of text linguistics. Many previous studies on the role of cohesive devices were based on Halliday and Hasan’s classification of cohesive devices as a firm framework.

3. Research methods

This research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The former was used to describe and analyze data to find out lexical and grammatical cohesive devices, while the latter was useful for determining the frequency of occurrences of different types of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks. The descriptive method was mainly employed to give a detailed description of cohesive devices used in IELTS Listening Tasks.

The samples are cohesive devices collected from tapescripts of Section 4 in IELTS Listening Tasks. They were taken from the IELTS Test Books officially published by Cambridge University Press, McGraw ESL/EFT, Macmillan Education, Longman and British Council and IDP:IELTS Australia from 2008 to 2018. The samples were identified based on the working definition of cohesive devices presented on section 2.2 of this article: Cohesive devices are single words or phrases that basically make the text connected. These expressions show semantic relations between an

element in a text and other elements crucial for interpretation of the text. 548 cohesive devices were withdrawn from 92 tapescripts of IELTS Listening Section 4 in IELTS Listening Tasks. All of these samples were collected from updated IELTS Test Books.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Grammatical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

Grammatical cohesive devices play a crucial role in making up coherence and understanding in any discourses. Following are common types of grammatical cohesive devices.

a. Reference

- Personal reference

“Now, let’s consider two types of mistake that can occur when a manager actually starts to set up a duplicate system to replicate a successful process. Firstly, perhaps he forgets that he was just trying to copy another process, and starts trying to improve on it.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.144)

- Demonstrative reference

“For example, we know from the Dynamic paintings that over 8,000 years ago, Aborigines would have rarely eaten fish and sea levels were much lower at this time.”

(Cullen, P., French, A., & Jakeman, V., 2014, p.347)

- Comparative Reference

“The goal, then, is to utilize existing knowledge and not to generate knowledge. It’s a less glamorous activity than pure innovation, but it actually happens more often.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2010, p.145)

b. Substitution

“On eight occasions, a bird’s first contact was by using a tool. In all three trials, Barney began by using a stick for inspection. One involved a rubber snake.”

(Cullen, P., French, A., & Jakeman, V., 2014, p.364)

c. Ellipsis

“In those days it was very difficult to send records from one part of the world to another (...) so it wasn’t possible for them to share their information until the electric telegraph became more widespread.”

(Thomas, B., & Hashemi, L., 2011, p. 200)

d. Conjunction

- Additive conjunction

“There were many Midland trades, some of them indigenous, some of them not. For example, there were immigrants from France who came as early as the late sixteenth century and they were producers of glass.”

(Mann, M., & Taylor-Knowles, S., 2009, p. 207)

- Adversative conjunction

“Next there’s the old problem with chewing gum. Everyone knows that after a few minutes’ chewing it loses its minty flavor. However, if you ask people to chew up to the point where it becomes tasteless, and then ask them to eat a little sugar and continue chewing, to most people’s surprise, what happens is that the original mintiness actually returns because it is the sweetness which is needed to make the mintiness perceptible.”

(Mann, M., & Taylor-Knowles, S., 2009, p. 200)

- Causal conjunction

“And one of the first-year students I interviewed wanted reassurance that no names would be traceable from the answers. I was so surprised, because they think nothing of telling you about themselves and their opinions in seminar groups.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2013, p.140)

- Temporal conjunction

“These involve adjusting attitudes, first of all... being more realistic and cautious really. Secondly, they involve exerting strict controls on the organizational and operational systems.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2013, p.145)

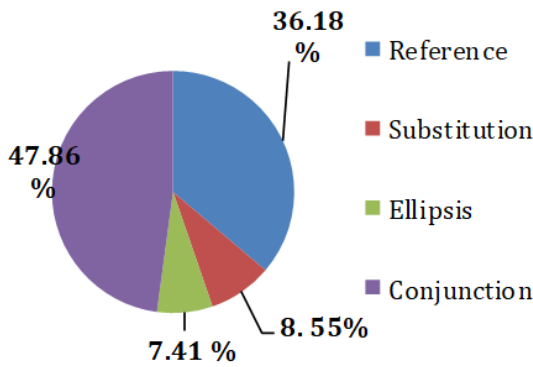


Figure 1. Frequencies of subtypes of grammatical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

Figure 1 is a pie chart illustrating the frequency of subtypes of grammatical cohesive devices used in IELTS Listening Tasks. Reference, substitution, conjunction and ellipsis are all found out in IELTS Listening Tasks but the rates of their occurrence are quite different. Conjunction dominates with its use accounting for the highest percentage of all, at 47.86%. Next comes reference, representing a much lower rate, at 36.18%. A minority of grammatical cohesive devices are categorized as ellipsis and substitution at 7.41% and 8.55% respectively. Despite differences in terms of frequency, all subtypes of grammatical cohesive devices play an essential role in making the texts coherent and more comprehensible.

4.2. Lexical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

Lexical cohesion is established through the structure of lexis or vocabulary. Following are commonly-used types of lexical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks.

a. Reiteration

- Repetition

“Now, the second gallery I’d like to talk about is Tate St. Ives, which is in Cornwall. It was built on the site of a gasworks and it overlooks Porthme or Beach. Tate St. Ives is housed in a three-story building that was designed by the architects Evans and Shaleff.”

(Mann, M., & Taylor-Knowles, S., 2009, p. 112)

- Synonymy

“Many toxins, as I’m quite sure you are aware, originate from plants or animals. The whales ingest these toxins in its normal feeding behavior but whether

these poisons directly or indirectly lead to stranding and death seems to depend upon the toxin involved.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2014, p.135)

- Antonymy

“Now one of the major benefits of this culture is that it’s flexible. But it does have some major disadvantages too.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2014, p.140)

- Hyponymy

“When you look at international restaurant menus and supermarkets, they all tend to feature the same range of meats – beef, lamb, chicken, pork, that sort of thing. But people are always interested in something different and we’re now finding that farming can bring new types of meat to our tables. The kangaroo is now being farmed for its meat and eaten outside Australia, where it comes from.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2008a, p.154)

b. Collocation

“Today, I’d like to introduce Ted Hunter, who used to rear sheep and poultry but who is here to tell us about a rather unusual type of livestock that he’s been concentrating on in the last few years. Ted Hunter is a member of the Domesticated Ostrich Farming Association, and is here to tell us about possibilities of breeding and rearing these birds here in this country.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2017, p.146)

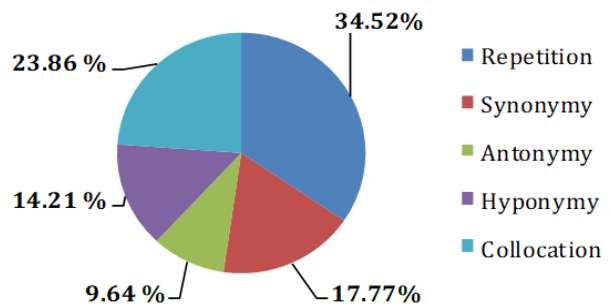


Figure 2. Frequency of subtypes of lexical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

The pie chart in Figure 2 compares the occurrences of different types of lexical cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks. It is evident that repetition is the most common type of lexical cohesive devices, representing over one third. In the second place is collocation making up approximately one quarter. The use of synonymy and

hyponymy is slightly less frequent, accounting for 17.77% and 14.21% respectively. Lastly, nearly one in ten lexical cohesive devices is categorized as antonymy.

4.3. Syntactic features of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

4.3.1. Syntactic roles of grammatical cohesive devices

- Subject

“Next, there’s a further instance, this time in the water and it’s come from Japan. It’s a delicious but very fast-spreading seaweed and is one of many exotic species, large and small, in the seas covering the rocks around Australia.”

(Thomas, B., & Hashemi, L., 2011, p. 185)

- Object

“Trees need water to grow. They also need some sunlight to grow and you need room to put them. If you have the chance of knocking buildings down and replacing them, then suddenly you can start looking at different ways to design the streets and to introduce...”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.135)

- Adverbial

“If I could start by briefly explaining what steps were taken to find out student opinion and how we have arrived at conclusions. Firstly, a meeting was held in the current Union for our SU Committee to explain the options. Then we invited all students to submit written suggestions for the design, placing cards in a suggestion box. These suggestions then provided the basis for the design of a questionnaire, which was completed by approximately two thousand of the College students over a period of three weeks. Finally, the SU Committee collated the results and drew up a report.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.144)

4.3.2. Syntactic roles of lexical cohesive devices

- Subject

“Tate Britain was the first of the four Tate galleries in to open and it was established in 1897. During its lifetime, Tate Britain has been damaged twice: once by flood waters from the River Thames, and once by bombings during World War II.”

(Thomas, B., & Hashemi, L., 2011, p. 112)

- Object

“Now the way she’s carrying out this research is worth thinking about. She’s using a mixture of studies using birds kept in laboratories, and studies carried out outdoors in the wild.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2017, p.109)

- Verb

“We need to create corridors for migration, so they can get from one area to another safely. As well as this, action needs to be taken to lower the levels of fishing quotas to prevent overfishing of endangered species.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2017, p.114)

- Complement

“There are two more points to do with corporate crime that I’d like to illustrate with reference to a specific event which occurred several years ago. This was an explosion of a large oil tanker which caused the loss of more than fifty lives of the crew. It was an explosion which never should have happened.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.140)

4.4. Semantic features of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

4.4.1. Semantic Features of Grammatical Cohesive Devices

a. Deixis

In IELTS Listening Tasks, deictic terms help the listener identify the referent of a referring expression through its spatial or temporal relationship with the situation of utterance. Below are some examples:

“The main source of energy that most of them use is still coal, and when it’s burned it releases mercury into the atmosphere.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2017, p.109)

“A much more serious case, also in Scotland, as well as other countries, along with the latest victim, Iceland, is the New Zealand flatworm. It is a most unwelcome newcomer in these regions of north-west Europe.”

(Thomas, B., & Hashemi, L., 2011, p. 185)

b. Conjunction

Conjunction marks the relation between what is to follow and what has been done before. Generally, conjunction involves four semantic functions.

- Additive relation

“In the display you will notice samples of work on book cover design, and as well as having all the necessary computer programmes for dealing with printing we have some old printing presses.”

(McCarter, S., 2008, p.162)

- Adversative relation

“When meshing began, approximately fifteen hundred sharks were caught in the first year. However, this declined in the years that followed, and since that time, the average annual catch has been only about a hundred and fifty a year.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2010, p.151)

- Causal relation

“Ten years later, in 1949, systematic meshing was extended to include the beaches to the south of Sydney. As a result of the general success of the program in Sydney, shark – meshing was introduced to the state of Queensland around 1970.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.151).

- Temporal relation

“First in this seminar, I’m going to give a brief introduction to contemporary research on rock art. Second, I’m going to give you some do’s and don’ts for our fieldwork trip in April – so please listen very carefully.

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2012, p.134)

4.4.2. Semantic Features of Lexical Cohesive Devices

a. Similarity of lexical environment

Lexical environment denotes a segment of reality symbolized by a set of related words. The words in a semantic environment share a common semantic category. Below is an example illustrating this property:

“Now - What about the design of the slides for your laptop? Well the important thing here is to be consistent. You need to have the same type of font and use the same color and size for the same elements. For example, all headers need to look the same, all bullet points need to be presented in the same way. And don’t just stick to words. Bring the presentation to life by adding graphics.”

(Cullen, P., French, A., & Jakeman, V., 2014, p.346)

b. Identity of lexical reference

In terms of identity of lexical reference, lexical cohesion is manifested in three ways: repetition, super-ordinate/ hyponymy, synonymy and near synonymy. Here is an example:

“There are several reasons for this lack of interest in corporate crime, compared with other types of crime. It’s very complex, whereas with conventional crime it’s usually possible to follow what’s going on without specialist knowledge. As well as this, whereas conventional crime usually has a lot of human interest, corporate crime often has much less.”

(Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C., 2009, p.139)

4.5. Summary

Below are diagrams illustrating common types of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks and their frequencies of occurrence.

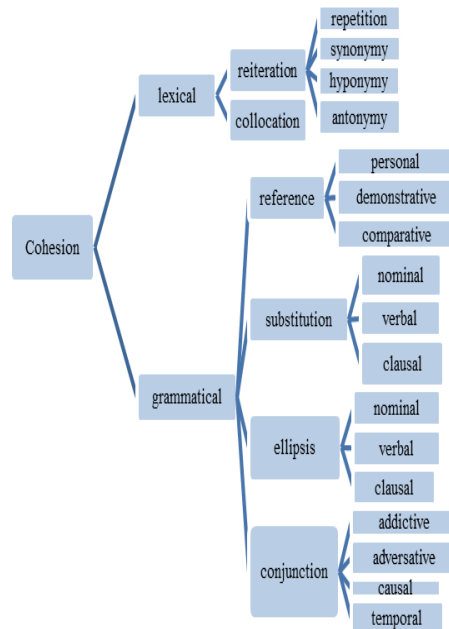


Figure 3. Common types of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

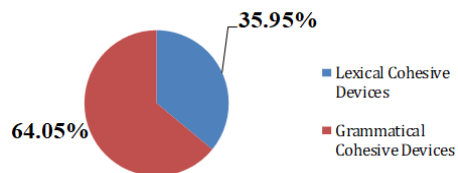


Figure 4. Frequency of Subtypes of Cohesive Devices in IELTS Listening Tasks

Types of Cohesive Devices	Syntactic Roles	Semantic Features
Grammatical Cohesive Devices	Subject/ Object/ Adverbial	- Deixis (personal /spatial/ temporal) - Conjunction (additive/ adversative/ causal/ temporal)
Lexical Cohesive Devices	Subject/ Verb/ Object/ Complement	- Similarity of lexical environment (collocation) - Identity of lexical reference (repetition, super-ordinate/ hyponymy, synonymy and near synonymy)

Table 1. *Syntactic Roles and Semantic Features of Cohesive Devices in IELTS Listening Tasks*

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks are categorized into two types: lexical cohesive devices and grammatical cohesive devices with the latter being more commonly - used than the former; however, both types of cohesive devices play an equally important role in making the texts cohesive and coherent. More specifically, grammatical cohesive devices consist of four subtypes namely reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction, among which reference and conjunction are the two most frequently used devices. As regards lexical cohesive devices, they are comprised of reiteration and collocation, the former includes repetition, synonymy, hyponymy and antonymy; among all these types, repetition and collocation respectively rank first and second in terms of occurrence frequency.

Syntactically, cohesive devices are identified via their syntactic roles in a sentence. Grammatical cohesive devices primarily function as subject, object, and adverbial. Meanwhile, the syntactic roles of lexical

cohesive devices include subject, object, verb and complement.

Semantically, cohesive devices are analyzed based on the lexico-grammatical system proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Grammatical cohesive devices show the semantic relation according to deixis (personal, spatial and temporal) and conjunction relation (additive, adversative, causal and temporal). The semantic relation of lexical cohesive devices is created through similarity of lexical environment (collocation) and identity of lexical reference (repetition, super-ordinate/ hyponymy, synonymy and near synonymy). The use of grammatical cohesive devices creates a unified network of meanings because it helps to avoid repetition, maintain communication sequence, integrate information and enrich semantic texture; meanwhile, lexical cohesive devices are necessary to elaborate the main theme of the text and create unified meaning.

In general, in Section 4 of IELTS Listening Tasks, cohesive devices appear with high frequencies. Diversification of subtypes of cohesive devices in the texts plays an important role in linking ideas coherently. Therefore, if the listeners or test takers are well aware of this characteristic and do regular practice, they can catch up with the flow of information and grasp the gist of the listening tests.

5.2. Implications

As the listening skill is challenging to most students, teachers should play the role of a facilitator to guide them in listening activities at class. Specifically, to help students develop effective listening, teachers had better introduce to them necessary strategies to cope with each distinctive task type. For example, when students are going to complete Section 4 in IELTS Listening Tasks, they often deal with Note Completion Task, it is essential for in-charge teachers to remind them of techniques to deal with this task type. In addition, teachers play a crucial role in assisting students to surmount their difficulties in comprehending spoken language. This can take the form of developing learners' listening strategies. The pre-listening stage in their lessons is extremely challenging for students to listen without any idea of what is expected to hear. Therefore, teachers ought to give them time to read instructions and questions carefully so that they can

figure out the speech's content. Before listening to the listening text in Section 4 of IELTS Listening Tasks, learners must read through and underline the key words, which will help them listen selectively with a purpose to avoid the feeling of being overloaded with the flow of incoming information. Also, they can know which point of the listening text should be picked up or ignored in order that understanding the main topic is not affected. Therefore, recognizing cohesive devices used in a talk is an effective problem-solving solution to general listening comprehension. Based on cohesive devices, listeners can find out the main focus of the speakers and their purpose of giving information. More importantly, listeners will be less likely to get lost if they can catch up with temporal conjunction such as "firstly", "next", "finally" because these words signal where the speakers are in the flow of information. Besides, while doing listening tasks, listeners should know how to choose suitable listening strategies to assist their comprehension. When having problems with new words, instead of spending much time on thinking of their meanings, learners must ignore them and keep listening to incoming information. In these cases, listening to collocation words, synonyms and antonyms which appear in sequences of sentences in the listening exercise can help learners guess what the context is like.

In teaching IELTS Listening, besides using official IELTS Listening Tests, teachers need to select a wide range of extra materials with academic content to support students' learning as students should be exposed to different listening experiences and texts including stories, descriptive talks in the academic setting. Teachers should also choose listening materials from the Internet and the radio with interesting and familiar topics so that students can relate what they are doing in the listening lessons to the real life and build up diverse vocabulary. When correcting students' answers,

teachers should analyze the use of cohesive devices in IELTS Listening Tasks, thereby guiding the students through the process of arriving at the correct answers based on an in-depth understanding of cohesion and cohesive devices.

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NGHIÊN CỨU CÁC PHƯƠNG TIỆN LIÊN KẾT TRONG CÁC BÀI NGHE HIỂU IELTS

Tóm tắt: Các phương tiện liên kết đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc kiến tạo lời nói và truyền tải nội dung đến người nghe. Vì vậy, nắm vững kiến thức về các phương tiện liên kết sẽ giúp người học ngôn ngữ cải thiện kỹ năng nghe hiểu. Dựa trên khung lý thuyết về liên kết của Halliday và Hasan (1976), bài viết này tập trung tìm hiểu các loại phương tiện liên kết, đồng thời nghiên cứu các đặc điểm cú pháp và ngữ nghĩa của các loại phương tiện liên kết thường được sử dụng trong các bài nghe hiểu IELTS. Để tiến hành nghiên cứu này, 548 phương tiện liên kết đã được nhận diện từ 92 bản ghi phân âm thanh từ các bài nghe của Phần 4 thuộc bài thi nghe hiểu IELTS. Tất cả các mẫu được chọn đều trích từ các tài liệu cập nhật về bài thi IELTS. Chúng tôi hy vọng rằng kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ hữu ích cho người Việt học tiếng Anh trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nghe cũng như giúp thí sinh thi IELTS xử lý bài thi nghe hiểu IELTS tốt hơn.

Từ khóa: liên kết; các phương tiện liên kết; kỹ năng nghe; đặc điểm cú pháp; đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa.